

The Gospels

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Before I explain the Gospels and dive into the information, one of the most important things to make a note of is how to interpret the gospels. It is crucial that we DO NOT harmonize them. Each Gospel tells stories about Jesus' life but from different points of views. It is especially important to not harmonize the synoptic gospels. The synoptic gospels are Matthew, Mark and Luke. Synoptic means that in general, they tell a similar story in the same order and in that some of the stories overlap. That will become clearer when I explain how Matthew, Mark and Luke are really connected. It is also important to not discredit or want to choose one story over the other. This alludes to the idea of a single story and there is no single story to any story. Here is a quote by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from "The Danger of a Single Story" that kind of explains why single stories are dangerous. I want to focus on the last line: "When we reject the single story, that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise." This is important and relevant to understanding the Gospels because there is no one story about Jesus. There are multiple accounts and they are told from different perspectives and should all be appreciated as sources of early Christianity.

As we move forward, let's keep this in mind, it will be hard but let's try to. So, the word Gospels was said to mean "Good news" and eventually a second meaning : "The narrative about Jesus came about. The 4 gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John explain Jesus' life story in the form of his birth, Jesus as God's son, his life work, death and resurrection stories. The 4 books piece together these different aspects and we'll see that as I briefly summarize each.

Mark's account focused on Jesus as a suffering servant, the son of God and was not as detailed, it contained broad and general information. Mark, however, lacks the birth and resurrection story. It is also important to recognize that Mark did not mention the Torah but Matthew does. So right away we might be a little skeptical which is not a bad feeling to have. Matthew focused on Jesus' role as a teacher and seems to write for a Jewish audience given the mentions and importance of the Torah in Jesus' teachings. Other things that

Matthew pointed out were the nativity story; Joseph's dream and the virgin conception which as mentioned before, Mark lacks. I am emphasizing these details because it will be important when I speak about the sources of information for the synoptic Gospels. Luke also has some information about the birth and resurrection but it is said to be distinct from the story presented in Matthew. Again, it is okay to start to be skeptical about how these stories are lining up. Some stories that are unique to Luke are the parables of The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son.

John's story agrees with the gospels on several key points,, although there are some important differences with the synoptics. He speaks about Jesus as the son of God sent to abolish evil. He also fills in gaps that are missing from the Synoptic Gospels such as the story of Lazarus and turning water into wine.

So I have mentioned that Matthew, Mark and Luke are the synoptic gospels but I haven't quite explained why, this basically means they tell a similar story in that they are believed to have similar sources. Let's illustrate that. Matthew and Luke both got some of their information from Mark, hence those 3 are the Synoptic gospels. To dive even further, there is a source here Q, which is said to be where Matthew and Luke both got some information, that was not included in Mark's account. In addition, there is also information that was neither in Mark's account nor Q, which accounts for some of the differences and inconsistencies in Matthew and Luke which came from separate sources, special M for Matthew and Special L for Luke.

From what you just heard, it is possible that you are skeptical and want to jump into comparing the Gospels. I would encourage you to thoroughly analyze the 4 canonical Gospels on their own before you begin to do that, this was merely a summary and there is much more to them.

This concludes my presentation; I hope you found this to be helpful in understanding the Gospels and how they connect to Early Christianity and Ancient Judaism.

References

- “Gospels and Acts” in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Mitzi J. Smith and Sung Yuk Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament: A Reintroduction*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.